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ABSTRACT

Social marketing campaigns employ general marketing strategies to deal with social issues and affect behavioral change. These issues include environmental dilemmas, community health problems, and social development. Noting that educational issues are not often addressed, a meeting was convened by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) to present social marketing as a strategy to boost family involvement in education. Drawing from this meeting and from other research by HFRP, this article describes social marketing principles and shows how they apply to family-school partnerships. The article proposes that a formal introduction to the principles of social marketing can benefit those involved in such efforts. Seven principles are used as a framework for social marketing: (1) all strategies begin with the customer; (2) markets are carefully segmented; (3) consumer behavior is the bottom line; (4) intervention involves the four Ps: product, price, place, and promotion; (5) competition is always recognized; (6) market research is essential to designing, pretesting, and evaluating programs; and (7) programs must be cost effective. The article concludes by asserting that the principles of social marketing can help managers and educators develop strong and persuasive programs that can play an important role in the lives of many children. (KB)

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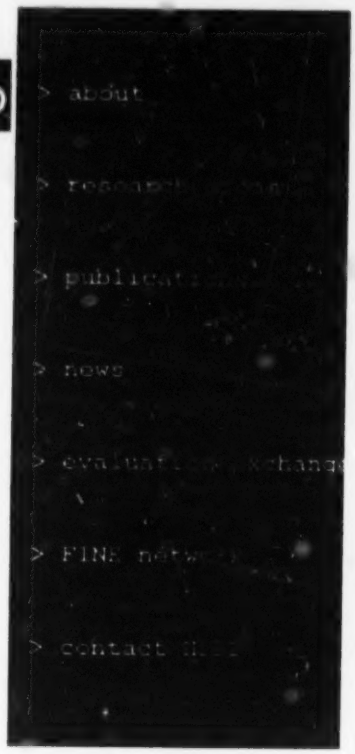

Generating Family-School Partnerships through Social Marketing

by Sylvia Sensiper

Abstract
Social marketing campaigns employ general marketing strategies to deal with social issues and affect behavioral change. These issues include environmental dilemmas, community health problems, and social development. Educational issues, however, are not often addressed. At a meeting convened by the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), social marketing was presented as a strategy to boost family involvement in education. While managers of family-school partnership programs have intuitively applied some social marketing principles to their programs, few are aware of the theory and practice of marketing. Drawing from this meeting and from other research by HFRP, this article describes social marketing principles and shows how they apply to family-school partnerships. The paper proposes that a formal introduction to the principles of social marketing can benefit those involved in such efforts. The seven principles outlined by Alan Andreason (Marketing Social Change 1995) are used as a framework.

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Introduction

The Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a research center associated with the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Its mission is to influence program and policy development through research on programs that support and strengthen families, and through evaluation of those programs.

Research has shown that parent involvement plays an important role in education, contributing to both student achievement and school reform. In November 1997, HFRP convened a meeting of managers of six national organizations promoting family-school partnerships to discuss strategies to promote those partnerships. Beverly Schwartz, Director of Marketing for the Academy for Education Development, presented the principles of social marketing and discussed ways in which they apply to educational programs. While many of the managers found that they had been following numerous social marketing principles on an intuitive basis, they were not aware of the wide scope of formal principles that they could employ to enhance the marketing of their programs. All of the participants agreed that a formal introduction to the theory and principles of social marketing was helpful in providing them with a strong foundation for future planning.

In the material that follows, the results of that discussion have been integrated with additional research carried out by HFRP and other organizations concerned with family-school partnerships. Andreason's (1995) seven principles of social marketing are used as an overarching explanatory rubric and organizational frame for the information.

All strategies begin with the customer

Beverly Schwartz told the participants that the primary strategy was to have managers begin to think of the people that they wanted to reach as their "customers." "There's no such thing as the general public. You need to know who your audience is and develop your message and program with them in mind," she said. Schwartz advised managers that were new to the concept to ask themselves three questions: What's the most important thing I want to accomplish? Whose behavior do I want to change? Whom do I want to reach?

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Program managers who want to promote family-school partnerships can best build a persuasive campaign, first, by understanding customer needs, wants, values, and perceptions. "Know exactly who your audience is and look at everything from their point of view," suggested Schwartz. She also recommended that managers develop what is known as a *situational analysis*, or audience profile, which involves their asking a series of questions such as: What do we know about our customers; their daily lives and environment? What misconceptions do they hold? What fears and barriers do they see? What channels of communication do they pay attention to?

Very often, family-school partnership programs tend to give priority to presenting a problem to parents, such as school test scores, student behavior, or school safety. They assume that all parents will share their concerns. Because program managers often do not fully understand the kinds of information that parents look for and pay attention to, however, many outreach efforts succeed in involving only a handful of interested parents. Focusing communication and activities around the customer will greatly benefit schools and community-based organizations by increasing participation. Managers who know and understand the unique characteristics of families, for example, are more likely to influence customer participation than those who do not. In *Unfamiliar Partners: Asian Parents and U.S. Public Schools*, the authors note that efforts to improve home/school communications among the Hmong must take into account the Hmong community's reliance on oral communication. Further, they recommend that teachers and school personnel identify individuals with access to the local oral network and use them to communicate with the parents.

In order to ensure sustained participation, it is important to provide parents with incentives, such as activities in which they can exercise leadership, develop a sense of ownership, and make a tangible contribution. For example, the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia has been working with schools to develop a parents' organization called the Khmer Parent Union, which permits parents to be leaders, rather than followers. The association encourages parents to organize events and invites the school to participate. The association's director notes, "We want parents themselves to create activity where they can be decision makers and then do something they like to do...Ask them what they can do best and utilize that skill." It is as organizers, and not just participants, that families are more likely to be involved and engaged with the school.

Markets are carefully segmented

Program managers who wish to change behavior segment consumers into meaningful groupings. Segmenting customers for strategic purposes helps with the development of distinctive programs directed specifically at particular concerns. The more closely tailored a program to the needs and wants of the customer, the more likely the customer will respond in the desired ways.

In one example of segmenting customers, program developers for Families and Schools Together ¾ FAST ¾ based in Milwaukee, considered what they knew about the parents in their district as they began to refine their program. Information they needed to know included: What kinds of skills and competencies did the parents have? What time conflicts did they encounter in getting to a FAST program? Did they require additional transportation and child care? What attitudes did they have toward the teachers and schools in general? By answering these and other crucial questions, program developers were able to tailor their programs to the specific needs of the parents in their groups.

When Missouri's Parents as Teachers (PAT) program was launched, consultant Burton White also employed market segmentation. PAT is a school-based program designed to enhance child development through home visits with families of infants and pre-school children. White created a sample population that was balanced by race, ethnicity, income, and educational status. In the interest of cost considerations, he limited the sample population to first-time parents, as he felt they would apply what they learned to future children. He further segmented this population by eliminating children at high

risk of physical or emotional abuse and severely handicapped children. In this way, the first phase of the PAT program was developed to deal with a population that had similar parenting interests and concerns. As the program progressed, additional segment populations could be added.

Consumer behavior is the bottom line

Program managers must keep in mind the goal of behavior change. Success is judged by what customers ultimately *do*, not simply by the fact that information has been disseminated. "Knowledge and information are great, but it's a change in behavior that counts," said Schwartz. A conscientious manager, for example, would not be satisfied merely with educating parents about the importance of literacy, but would instead want evidence that the information had led to an increased willingness among parents to read to their children. In some instances, a concerned manager would be pleased even to know that a parent had simply taken the time to read the cereal box labels to his/her child at breakfast, if doing so signaled a positive change in the parent's behavior.

Similarly, a manager seeking to involve parents in asking appropriate questions during a parent-teacher conference should not be satisfied merely with disseminating a list of questions to the parents. Rather, the manager should evaluate success on the basis of the number of parents who, on their own, begin to recognize problems and initiate questions about the school's efforts to enhance their child's performance or improve academic and social programs.

Interventions involve the Four P's: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion

Program managers need to develop their strategies around four important factors familiar to marketers in the commercial sector. The "product," or behavior, to be marketed must be made as attractive as possible. In addition, the trade-offs of benefits and price must be well thought out. Also, products and services must be readily available in order to facilitate behavior change. And, while promotion can include traditional forms of advertisements such as brochures and posters, it must also be conceived broadly, in relation to the specific circumstances of customers.

·*Product*. The product or program must be one that has recognizable benefits for the participating parents. Is it clear to the parents, for example, that they will learn a new skill and develop competency and or help their child reap more rewards from school? Will they have a better understanding of school reforms and how they can participate in the changes? A well defined program with sustainable benefits is often one that involves development and refinement over time. Investing in fine tuning a program is well worth the effort.

· *Price*. Because of the busy lives that families lead today, in which time is a precious resource, there is always a "cost" involved in efforts to increase parent participation in family involvement programs. This cost might not involve the exchange of money, however. If a manager is interested in having parents attend a special event, for instance, transportation, child care, or dinner may be included as a way of encouraging parents to participate ¾ thus making the "price" competitive. In one example, The Parent Child Workshop in Muskegon, Michigan, held lengthy negotiations with the transit authority to get a bus route changed to include a stop at the building that housed its parenting program.

Language can also be considered a cost factor. Parents need to feel comfortable with the language of communication in parent-teacher conferences and school assemblies. If meetings are held in English, some immigrant parents may feel intimidated by the "cost" of trying to understand discussions and expressing themselves in ways that will be understood accurately by others. Whenever possible, meetings should be conducted in the native languages of families, or interpreters should be provided. One father who attended school meetings held in Spanish commented, "In these meetings, we can learn to talk without being embarrassed. It's very important to get rid of our inhibitions because it is very difficult to talk in public."

Place. Planning meetings at convenient and comfortable locations helps ensure attendance for programs and special events. If parents have trouble getting to the school in the evening, the events organizers should arrange for a location that is convenient for as many people as possible, such as a community center, or library, or someone's house, if it is a small group. Creating a friendly and positive atmosphere through such gestures promotes open communication and meaningful sharing. One example of taking such considerations into account involves the community-based affiliates of the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), who work closely with churches to involve students, parents, and the community in promoting student achievement. Parents and clergy form education committees that sponsor recognition programs. Every six weeks, students receive public recognition in churches for improvements in school attendance and grades.

Promotion. Promotion is an important part of "selling" a program. The traditional methods of promoting programs through mailings or through other means of disseminating written materials can usually be enhanced through one-on-one contact between parent and parent, or teacher and parent. In one example, as a public demonstration of support for schools committed to reform efforts, Texas IAF parents and teachers seeking to draw greater parent engagement from the community organize a "Walk for Success" for schools interested in these reform efforts. Church and civic leaders as well as teachers, students, and parents join the walk, which takes place around the periphery of the school and within nearby neighborhoods. After the walk, parents and teachers involved in organizing the event visit homes to talk to parents about ways to improve schools and to inform parents about available school programs.

A program can also extend its range of influence, with very little cost to the organization, by establishing and working with a network of professional alliances. Mildred Winter, founder of PAT, found a way to use her network of allies when local pediatricians questioned whether PAT's developmental screenings on young children by trained paraprofessionals would be sufficiently professional. Instead of addressing the doctors' concerns herself, Winter asked a doctor who served on PAT's advisory board to talk with the pediatricians on a professional level. This physician wrote editorials and made personal contact with the doctors to counter their resistance. Many professionals are more responsive if they can raise their concerns with a person who has similar expertise and knowledge.

Competition is always recognized

Like their colleagues in the commercial sector, program managers implement their activities in the context of competitive claims on the time, preferences, and resources of families. In many cases, it is not other products or programs that are rivals but rather those competing factors or behaviors which inhibit the adoption of the desired practice among the target audience.

Successful social marketers understand each time a customer makes a choice about taking action, she/he must give up an alternative. In planning and developing a program for parents, for example, a manager needs to find out about and take into consideration all other regularly scheduled programs and activities to minimize schedule conflicts because parents' time is so valuable. In one example, a preschool program in Covington, Kentucky, found a successful strategy for recruiting fathers for Dad's night: Event organizers invited a popular TV sports commentator to speak at their program. In this instance, rather than compete with TV sports, the program took advantage of fathers' interest in sports to promote attendance at the event.

Market research is essential to designing, pretesting, and evaluating programs

Program managers rely on research to understand customers and design appropriate programs. Sometimes the research simply involves having a number of conversations to learn the thoughts and feelings of those a manager is targeting, while at other times, a more complex and systematic study is necessary. Managers should also consider a process of continued information gathering once a program has been implemented so that evaluation and feedback are ongoing and useful.

Program evaluations can be used strategically to gain support for a program. For example, the FAST program highlights its positive results among students and parents in its promotional literature. Evaluation is an important tool for maintaining the quality of FAST. Local sites that replicate FAST can take advantage of available assistance on documentation, allowing them to compare local results with the national FAST data.

Programs must be cost effective

Program managers should use resources wisely, necessitating strategic decisions about which specific market to target and which to ignore. Schwartz advised managers to start their programs by targeting those people or groups most ready to change and then phasing in people who are more difficult to reach. Knowing that each group will also influence the other can help a manager formulate a plan. In one example, before getting help from Schwartz, a parent involvement project in Nicaragua aimed its marketing at both parents and teachers. "You can't do it all at once," she told them, and narrowed their focus to helping teachers understand the importance of getting parents involved in children's learning. This strategy helped the group work very effectively with the teachers and laid the groundwork for what became the second phase of the project's outreach to the parents. Because the teachers understood the benefits of parent involvement, they tended to be more open and receptive to parents, thus reinforcing parent participation.

Programs may find that there are some parents who fail to respond to the most persistent efforts to get them involved in their children's schooling. In *Helping Dreams Survive*, Jocelyn Garlington describes the difficulty of making choices about continued attempts to engage families in their children's schooling. She writes, "Could we in good conscience write off families? We finally decided that pursuing families who would not meet us halfway was draining valuable staff time and energy that would be better spend with parents who wanted to work with us toward positive solutions for kids." Her decision was to keep families who were difficult to reach informed through mailings and to concentrate staff efforts on participating families.

Conclusion

There are many opportunities to employ social marketing principles in education, especially in the area of family involvement. Thinking of parents as "customers" can help managers of family-school organizations partnerships to reach out to parents in effective and successful ways. While many academics and practitioners in the field have intuitively employed these strategies, a more formal introduction to the ideas and theories of social marketing can be valuable. The principles of social marketing can help managers and educators develop strong and persuasive programs that can play an important role in the lives of many children.